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**East Coast
Show Wrap-up**

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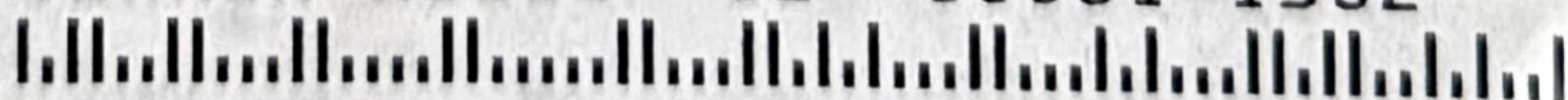
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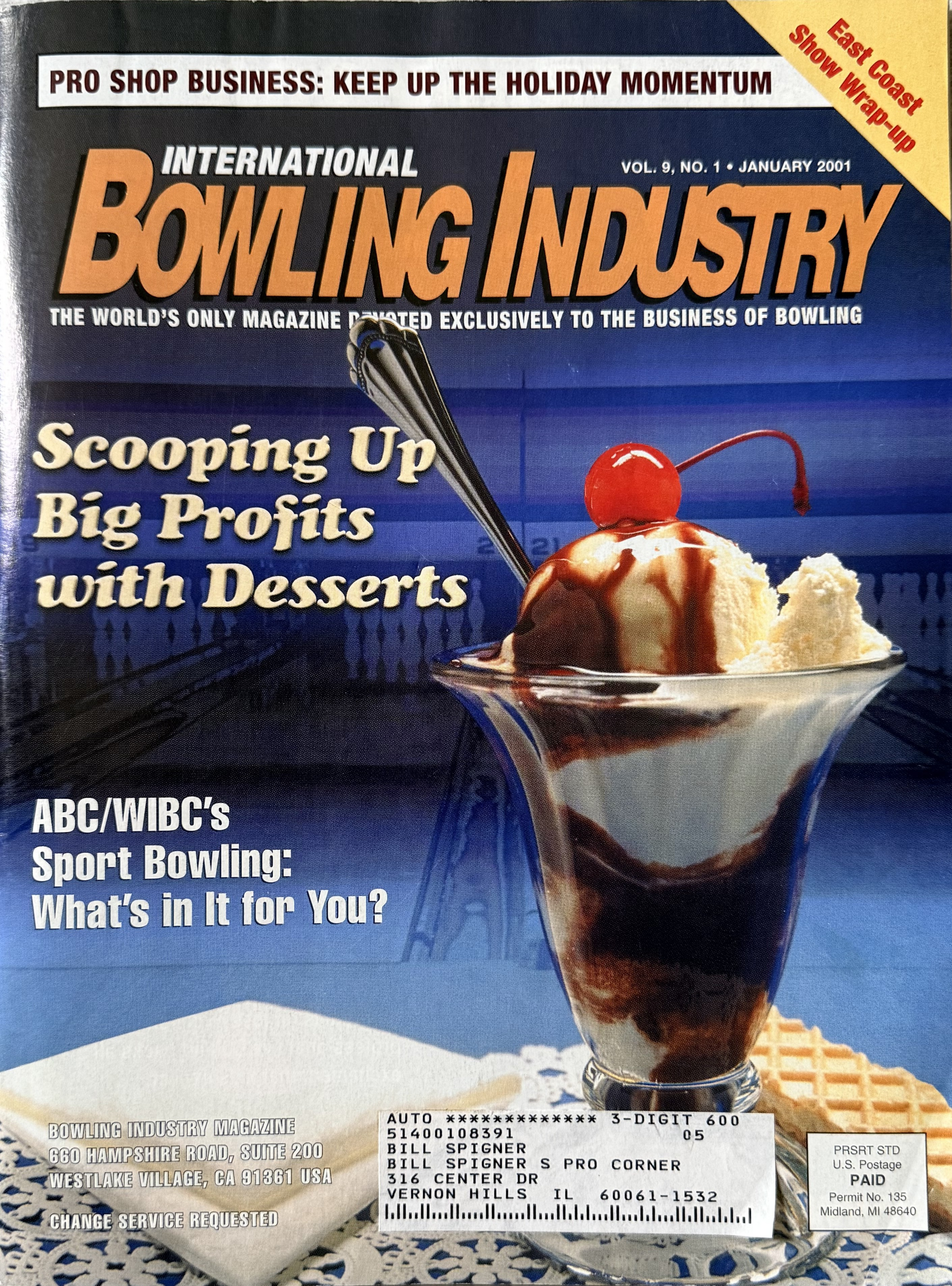
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Bowling Gold at Hawthorn Lanes

**■ Gold Level USA Bowling Coach & Proprietor
Bill Spigner Maintains a Top-of-the-Line Business**

BY STACY FISHER

“I grew up wanting to bowl professionally,” recounts Bill Spigner, general manager and proprietor at Hawthorn Lanes, a 38,000-square-foot, 40-lane facility in Vernon Hills, Illinois. “I actually started touring full time in my early twenties until I was 34. At the time, I never really thought about managing a bowling center, but along the way I got involved in teaching professional bowling camps.”

It was 1979, and Spigner eventually learned some pro shop skills as far as drilling and fitting go. “I had a drill press in my basement and would drill balls for a small fee for the students that I coached,” he says. It gave him some much needed experience in the art and science of drilling.

Spigner also says he was writing instructional articles for *Bowling Digest* and a local newspaper as well.

“When I stopped touring, I finally opened up a shop at Strike & Spare Lanes in Northbrook, Illinois in 1985. I was working there for a few years when I got involved with some people who were planning to build a bowling center (Hawthorn Lanes) near where I lived. After a meeting with them, they wanted me to come aboard as manager, which I wasn’t really interested in.” Spigner explains that his heart was in teaching the game and perhaps operating the proposed center’s pro shop. “But I did finally agree that if I had a partnership in the center, I would be more inclined to manage the facility,” which opened in 1989.

After one of the original partners dropped out, he was given the opportunity, along with his wife, Barb, to

become full partners in the project.

“Barb had previous experience in bowling as the national promotions



Bill Spigner

manager for Brunswick. So she was very bowling-literate.” Today, she’s the marketing manager for Hawthorn Lanes and president of the company.

Two years after buying into the business, Spigner’s father-in-law, the late Jim Urbanek, bought out the other partners, making the entire operation a family affair. Spigner’s sister-in-law, Sue Pinsler, also has a share in the business and works payroll.

Beside running the 600-square-foot pro shop at the center, Spigner tackles the challenges of running a successful business that employs nearly 50 people.

“I think some of the keys to a suc-

cessful operation start with a clean facility, one that’s continuing to modernize, and having employees who like their work, are well trained, and understand why people come through our doors—to have a great experience—and are willing to take care of their needs regardless of whether or not they happen to be difficult to please. The next thing is having a good marketing program that appeals to all types of people, from corporate parties and birthday parties, to league bowling from the novice up to the very high level bowler.”

To make his workers more valuable to the operation, Spigner cross-trains all his employees in a variety of tasks should a position open up that needs to be filled. “Also, cross-training, especially for someone at a young age, makes them feel more responsible and enthusiastic, which gives them a greater motivation to stay in the industry,” he adds.

Coaching is, of course, Spigner’s forte. In fact, he’s been an important player in the history of modern-day instruction, and is just one of 22 coaches worldwide to be certified a Gold Level USA Bowling coach.

The first bronze coaching conference was held in Las Vegas in the early ’90s, and Spigner was a part of the ground-breaking efforts. After acquiring his bronze level certification, he earned a silver certification a couple of years later. “There was no gold level at the time, and the ABC asked me if I would volunteer to be on the task force program, which lasted three years and resulted in a set of criteria for becoming a gold level coach.”

Hawthorn Lanes serves quite a diverse clientele, Spigner remarks. He caters to just about everybody, from

seniors to Cosmic Bowling patrons who are typically young, spirited players, he notes. "We're in an affluent area with many families and young people. Our youth program includes about 370 kids," who have the opportunity for private lessons.

Spigner continues to enjoy steady growth in leagues, he says, with 77 leagues last year numbering 3,400 bowlers. "We work very hard to keep our league base up," he says.

Kids in their league programs receive free coaching from volunteers. "There's also a lot of high-average bowlers here so kids have excellent exposure to them, too.

"When I'm trying to sell leagues to people, I ask them where else can you go once a week that provides a personal opportunity to get to know 50 people. Bowling provides that."

The most difficult aspect of running a center is the people you have to deal with every day, Spigner admits. And that includes both customers and employees.

The problems that arise ordinarily involve the different personalities that proprietors and managers come in contact with. "Even when a customer is wrong," Spigner insists, "you have to know how to make them feel right. A bowling center presents a unique work environment, because often times many of your customers are also your friends who come in to bowl. That can be a challenging situation because if there's a problem involving one of your friends you can't just throw them out or tell them off. And because employees are a close-knit group and are themselves customers at times, it's more of a juggling act keeping everybody happy."

Lane conditions seem to always be an on-going subject of controversy, Spigner notes. "There's always somebody who doesn't like what's going on as far as the oil patterns are concerned. We try to accommodate leagues by providing different conditions for different groups. I don't let them dictate to me the oil patterns I use, but I do strive to make it so the conditions match their skill level. For example, our Monday night men's league has a different taper laid down than does our Friday night mixed league. You're always looking to provide conditions that balance the needs of your more casual players versus the needs of more competitive bowlers."

Spigner states that he doesn't look at complaints as problems, but as

opportunities to solve problems.

Keeping the bowling environment novel is a constant factor in his marketing strategy, Spigner says.

"We recently completed a million dollar renovation that included all new scoring and masking units, settee furniture, a bar redesign, and also we did a lot of cosmetic makeover." New

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landscaping is planned for the future to make the entrance more appealing, too. "I think an important part of a flourishing operation is keeping the business looking fresh. People get excited when they see new things happening."

Spigner says he's never missed a single year of raising prices since he opened 10 years ago. "If we never increased our prices, we couldn't reinvest in modernization. (He raises prices for league bowlers by 25 cents a

year; open play climbs about 10 to 20 cents a year.) Our customers never seem to mind because the center remains an exciting place for them to come to play." Daytime price during the week is \$2.90 a game; nighttime after 6 p.m., Monday through Thursday is \$3.80; and Friday through Sunday after 6 p.m. is \$4. For three games, prime-time leagues pay \$9.75 during the week, and \$11.75 for league play on Saturday night. "Our ladies leagues pay \$9 during the weekdays."

He also provides ball ramps for handicapped groups who patronize the facility a couple times a week.

Spigner coaches eight to 10 people a week, he says. "I especially enjoy giving private lessons more than to groups. You get to know the person better when there's one-on-one teaching going on, and I like the challenge and responsibility it requires."

Spigner, 50, enjoys playing golf, and he's re-establishing his professional credentials once again by competing in senior bowling tournaments. He already owns one ABC Tournament and three PBA titles. He's also been elected to the American Bowling Congress Hall of Fame.

"For me, I've always loved the sport of bowling. Being in my position with my wife and family makes my being here an enormously positive experience. The people who come here just want to escape and have a great night out. And to me, bowling is the best night out you can have." ♣

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